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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9195

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNOSC/OSCE POST COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2653

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0480

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0350

RHMFUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC PRIORITY

RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: PRESIDENT TO USCIRF: "DID I PASS
MY EXAM?"

REF: ASHGABAT 0827

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The USCIRC meeting with President Berdimuhamedov was an honest give and take. The president told the delegation, "Take your time to meet whomever you want in Turkmenistan. Learn all you can. You'll probably find short-comings. If you mention them to us, we will fix them." In their lobby interview with state media following the meeting, all three commissioners described the meeting as "productive and encouraging." END SUMMARY.

13. (U) The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) met with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov for 45 minutes on August 20. Deputy of the Cabinet of Ministers/Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov sat in. The U.S. delegation members participating were head of delegation Commissioner Michael Cromartie, Commissioner Imam Talal Eid, Commissioner Dr. Don Argue, and USCIRF Senior Policy Analyst Catherine Cosman.

USCIRF'S RAISON D'ETRE

14. (SBU) Commissioner Cromartie, noting it was a great honor to meet with the president, explained the U.S. Congress created USCIRF to monitor religious freedom and freedom of thought and conscience around the world, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and many other international documents, to ensure respect for religious freedom is an integral part of U.S. foreign policy. He emphasized the USCIRF role is not to engage in diplomacy but to act as fact-finders.

15. (SBU) Cromartie said he highly commended Berdimuhamedov for the August 9 release of 11 prisoners of the Niyazov era, including former Chief Mufti of Turkmenistan Ibadullah

(reftel). He emphasized USCIRF does not seek to impose U.S. values and principles on other countries, but simply wants to encourage living up to international commitments. He added USCIRF is delighted with Berdimuhmedov's announced educational reforms and plans for Internet cafes. He asked for the president's thoughts on religious freedom for all citizens of Turkmenistan.

THE TURKMEN VERSION OF RECENT HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

¶6. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov, initially seeming a bit bored, rattled through his briefing paper. Turkmenistan is party to some 80 international agreements and conventions, including on human rights, and continues to work to implement its obligations. The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. In Turkmenistan, religious organizations are not run by the government. In 2003, parliament passed laws protecting human rights and ensuring freedom of religion and conscience, including the right of religious organizations to exist. In 2004, more legislation strengthened citizens' rights, and registration of religious groups began. Four "non-traditional" religious groups were registered: Baptists, Adventists, Hari Krishnas, and Bahais

¶7. (SBU) Cromartie interrupted, "But what about the unregistered groups?"

¶8. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov replied, "Be patient. I'm coming to that." More Protestant groups were registered. 2004 also saw new legislation to stop the prosecution of unregistered groups. To implement all these commitments, in 2005 parliament created the Commission on Human Rights, and several people were released from prison at that time.

ASHGABAT 00000845 002 OF 003

Looking up from his briefing paper, the president said, "Maybe I haven't said enough yet. The Ministry of Justice has registered 90-plus Islamic groups, 15 Christian groups, and some others, including, specifically, evangelical groups."

AMNESTIES WILL CONTINUE

¶9. (SBU) Cromartie thanked the president for his "fine presentation" and said he wanted to underline how delighted USCIRF was with the release of 11 prisoners on August 9. But he suspects there are more who will need clemency.

¶10. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov responded that one of his earliest acts as president had been to establish a commission to review such cases. The 11 were the first. Amnesty will not just be an annual event corresponding to national holidays, but will be an on-going process. But it's important to understand it's a relatively sensitive process. Cromartie guaranteed USCIRF would broadly publicize every amnesty.

THE OTHER COMMISSIONERS MAKE POSITIVE PRESENTATIONS

¶11. (SBU) Commissioner Argue thanked the president for the meeting. He said the spirit of openness was a positive indication for the future. He said, "Thank you for your commitment to diversity. You can build a great state on the foundation of diversity. We understand that change does not happen overnight. A journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step. We want to see your journey continue, and we will publicize your successes."

¶12. (SBU) Commissioner Eid noted it was a special honor to meet the president. He explained his background -- born in Lebanon and a graduate of al-Ahzar University in Cairo and Harvard University. He noted the United States has about 1,400 mosques and about 500 full-time Islamic schools. Muslims enjoy a comfortable life in the United States. When difficult issues arise, they solve them through dialogue with the law-enforcement agencies. In U.S. life, Muslims, Christians, and Jews live together peacefully and

productively, and the U.S. government encourages dialogue among all people of faith. The days immediately following 9/11 had been difficult for U.S. Muslims, but within five days President Bush went to the main Islamic Center in Washington, DC, and declared Muslims a full part of American society and the need to distinguish that all Muslims are not terrorists. Thereafter, Muslims felt safe again. The Imam said, "We are delighted you encourage openness among faiths in Turkmenistan. You have our support."

WHO CAN GO ON HAJJ? ANYONE WHO CAN AFFORD IT

¶13. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov noted his thanks for the expression of support. He noted his first foreign trip had been to Saudi Arabia where he had performed the Minor Hajj and where he had "prayed to the Almighty for the happiness and prosperity of all citizens of Turkmenistan."

¶14. (SBU) Cromartie asked, "Will you let more citizens go on hajj next time?"

¶15. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov chuckled and replied, "The government pays for one planeload of citizens to go on hajj, but we don't prevent private citizens from organizing their own trips. We have numerous travel agencies in touch with agencies in Saudi Arabia for this very purpose. The state funds a small number and wants to ensure they come from all levels of society, but we do not interfere in private plans

¶16. (SBU) Cromartie interjected, "Could I go on hajj if I

ASHGABAT 00000845 003 OF 003

couldn't afford it?"

¶17. (SBU) Senior Researcher Cosman interjected, "What about freedom of movement problems?" Imam Eid intervened, "The president has stated clearly any citizen can go on hajj, but the state will fund only a relatively small number."

OTHER ISSUES

¶18. (SBU) Cromartie asked if there are aspects of the law on religion that might need further revision to meet international standards. Berdimuhamedov decided to reply by listing the number of mosques the state is building throughout the country. He added Turkmenistan would not reject any opportunity to participate in international conferences on religious heritage and freedom. He also noted that the government had recently donated land to the Russian Orthodox Church for a fourth church in Ashgabat.

¶19. (SBU) Cromartie asked if Baptists would be allowed to build a new church. Berdimuhamedov replied, "Yes, if they are properly registered." Cromartie: "Why do they have to be registered?" Berdimuhamedov: "Because it's our law." Cromartie: "What if I have a church and don't want to register?" The meeting briefly broke down into multiple voices cross-talking. Cromartie: "Your 2003 law on registration is too restrictive. It requires too much information." "Nope," the president said, "that's how it is." Then he added, "But if changes to the law are needed, we'll listen to the people and make the changes. We want to be a democratic state without restrictions. I do not hand down orders from the top. I want full discussion and consensus on important issues like this."

¶20. (SBU) Cosman asked, "Would you consider a law allowing alternative service for conscientious objectors?" The president replied, "All issues can be considered. In fact we don't yet have statistics on this, but I think the situation must be fairly rare."

"DID I PASS MY EXAM?"

¶21. (SBU) Cromartie once again expressed his pleasure

meeting the president and asked, "Do you have any questions for us?"

¶22. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov laughed, "Did I pass my exam?" Then he added, "Seriously, take your time to meet whomever you want in Turkmenistan. Learn all you can. You'll probably find short-comings. If you mention them to us, we will fix them."

¶23. (SBU) In their lobby interview with state media following the meeting, all three commissioners described the meeting as "productive and encouraging." (COMMENT: We agree. END COMMENT.)
HOAGLAND